

Food Product Dating

Source: USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service



What is Dating?

"Open Dating" (use of a calendar date as opposed to a code) on a food product is a date stamped on a product's package to help the store determine how long to display the product for sale. It can also help the purchaser to know the time limit to purchase or use the product at its best quality. ***It is not a safety date.***

Is Dating Required by Federal Law?

Except for infant formula (see below), product dating is NOT generally required by Federal regulations. However, if a calendar date is used, it must express both the month and day of the month (and the year, in the case of shelf-stable and frozen products). If a calendar date is shown, immediately adjacent to the date must be a phrase explaining the meaning of that date such as "sell-by" or "use before."

There is no uniform or universally accepted system used for food dating in the United States. Although dating of some foods is required by more than 20 states, there are areas of the country where much of the food supply has some type of open date and other areas where almost no food is dated.

What Types of Food are Dated?

Open dating is found primarily on perishable foods such as meat, poultry, eggs and dairy products. "Closed" or "coded" dating might appear on shelf-stable products such as cans and boxes of food.

Types of Dates:

- A "**Sell-By**" date tells the store how long to display the product for sale. You should buy the product before the date expires.
- A "**Best if Used By (or Before)**" date is recommended for best flavor or quality. It is not a purchase or safety date.
- A "**Use-By**" date is the last date recommended for the use of the product while at peak quality. The date has been determined by the **manufacturer** of the product.
- "**Closed or coded dates**" are packing numbers for use by the manufacturer.

Safety After Date Expires:

Even if the date expires during home storage, a product should be safe, wholesome and of good quality if handled properly. Foods can develop an off odor, flavor or appearance due to spoilage bacteria. If a food has developed such characteristics, you should not use it for quality reasons.

If foods are mishandled, however, foodborne bacteria can grow and, if pathogens are present, cause foodborne illness — before or after the date on the package. For example, if hot dogs are taken to a picnic and left out several hours, they will not be safe if used thereafter, even if the date hasn't expired.

Other examples of potential mishandling are products that have been: defrosted at room temperature more than two hours; cross contaminated; or handled by people who don't practice good sanitation. Make sure to follow the handling and preparation instructions on the label to ensure top quality and safety.

Dating Infant Formula & Baby Food:

Federal regulations require a “use-by” date on the product label of infant formula under FDA inspection. If consumed by that date, the formula or food must contain no less than the quantity of each nutrient as described on the label. Dating of baby food is for quality as well as for nutrient retention.

The “use-by” date is selected by the manufacturer, packer or distributor of the product on the basis of product analysis throughout its shelf life, tests, or other information. It is also based on the conditions of handling, storage, preparation, and use printed on the label. Do not buy or use baby formula after its “use-by” date.

What do can codes mean?

Cans must exhibit a packing code to enable tracking of the product in interstate commerce. This enables manufacturers to rotate their stock as well as to locate their products in the event of a recall. These codes, which appear as a series of letters and/or numbers, might refer to the date or time of manufacture. They aren't meant for the consumer to interpret as "use-by" dates. There is no book or Web site that tells how to translate the codes into dates. Cans may also display "open" or calendar dates. Usually these are "best if used by" dates for peak quality.

In general, high-acid canned foods (tomatoes, fruits) will keep their best quality for 12 to 18 months; low-acid canned foods (meats, vegetables) for 2 to 5 years – if the can remains in good condition and has been stored in a cool, clean, dry place.

Dates on Egg Cartons:

If the egg carton has an expiration date printed on it, such as “EXP May1,” then May 1st is the last day a store may sell the eggs as “fresh”. On eggs which have a Federal grade mark, such as Grade AA, the date cannot be more than 30 days from the date on the eggs were packed into the carton. You should be able to use all the eggs safely for three to five weeks after the date.

Storage Times:

Since product dates aren't a guide for safe use of a product, how long can the consumer store the food and still use it at top quality? Follow these tips:

- If perishable, take the food home immediately after purchase and refrigerate it promptly. Freeze it if you can't use it within times recommended on chart.
- **Once a perishable product is frozen, it doesn't matter if the date expires because foods kept frozen continuously are safe indefinitely.**
- Follow handling recommendations on product.